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# A tasty chowder of Shakespeare in the park

By Robert Hurwitt
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

OAKLAND — "Two. Two. Two pairs of twins," proclaims the logo on the program for "The Comedy of Errors," imitating the most popular ad campaign in chewing gum history. The idea is apt enough. Shakespeare certainly set out to double your pleasure when he added a second set of identical twins to an old plot by the Roman playwright Plautus. And the play, though well-liked, has always been considered the intellectual equivalent of Shakespearean chewing gum.

But it works. Given good enough actors and a sharp enough staging, it's as reliable a comedy as any in the canon. Jan Powell's quick, concise, lightly inventive production for Free Shakespeare in the Park scores on both counts. It's the strongest offering the trifurcated San Francisco, Oakland-East Bay, Silicon Valley Shakespeare Festival has produced in years.

"Errors" opened Saturday in Oakland's Lakeside Park, where it plays through Sunday. In a new wrinkle, the Oakland-East Bay Shakespeare Festival shows are being presented Friday and Saturday evenings at 7 (Sunday at 4 p.m.), instead of in the afternoon. The show moves to Cupertino's Memorial Park, evenings, Aug. 13 through 29, then to Golden Gate Park for its traditional S.F. Shakespeare Festival afternoon performances Sept. 4 through Oct. 3.

Powell, the founding artistic director of Oregon's Tygres Heart Shakespeare Company, has taken quite a few liberties with the script. But then, "Errors" lends itself to such treatment. It gets set everywhere from ancient Greece (as written) to all kinds of futuristic neverlands. It's been astonishingly successful in stagings as varied as Robert Woodruff's famed Flying Karamazov-circus extravaganza to Tim Supple's wistful, contemplative, psychologically complex Royal Shakespeare Company version (presented by SFSF two years ago).

Powell's "Errors" doesn't reach the heights of either of those productions, nor the hilarity of Danny Scheie's landmark Shakespeare Santa Cruz production. But it's a solid, deftly paced, slyly beguiling and very funny show on its own.

The play's Ephesus has become a fishing village on the coast of Maine, a place of weathered wood houses and piers in Chad Owens' delightful set design, with the denizens garbed in appropriate yellow slickers, lumberjack shirts and sweaters by Keri Fitch. In place of the Duke of Ephesus, we have "Duke" Solinus (a dryly laconic, Downeastern Robert Hamm), the mayor. Shakespeare's Emelia, the abbess, has become Abbey (the superb Joan Mankin), and her abbey is now Abbey's lobster wagon.

In Powell's vision, this is an isolated little town that's a virtual New England equivalent of Tuna, Texas. She even opens with a nod to "Greater Tuna" in the form of a discursive radio news broadcast that sums up some of the necessary exposition, the background material about the death sentence on any travelers from Syracuse. She's also pruned the text fairly extensively (it runs under two hours) and transgendered a role or two.

And she's bedeviled the village with curious tourists who have a tendency to snap photos of villagers in the midst of picturesque marital squabbles. Which is just one of Powell's recurring and deftly handled sight and sound gags, like her use of sea chanteys and ballads ("Speed Bonnie Boat" under the story of a shipwreck) or the town cop's (Jonathan Gonzalez) periodic interjected "Aaayup."

She's also put together a cast with remarkable depth, right down to the minor roles. Abbey may only come on late in the play, to help unravel all the identical twin mistaken identities. But Mankin commands the stage with her first utterance, leaving no question about who's in charge in Ephesus (as well as putting in some sharp appearances as one of the nosier tourists).

The reliable Stacy Ross is delightfully flirty, in a businesslike way, as the town hooker who causes some of the confusion. Joe Higgins is a solidly stolid, hopeless Egeon, the father searching for his long-lost twin sons, both named Antipholus, and delivers a nice cameo as a Bible-thumping exorcist. Cat Schaulis Thompson, Roberto Robinson and Fred Webre provide vivid portraits of various merchants and Gigi Steyer is engaging as another tourist.

**Greg Bryan,** *left, and Robert Weinapple wear slickers in Free Shakespeare in the Park's "The Comedy of Errors," set on the Maine coast.*

Chad Fisk is an agreeably manly, increasingly confused, beguiled and afraid Antipholus of Syracuse, the twin who's come to a town where everyone mistakes him for his brother (including his brother's wife). Don Speziale, in the lesser role of Antipholus of Ephesus, is appropriately befuddled and comically outraged in a familiar world turned chaotic. Robert Weinapple and Greg Bryan are a perfectly matched, brightly comic, irrepressibly buoyant pair of addled twin Dromios, their servants.

Subtly, through canny shaping of the script and the strength of the performers, Powell has managed to give the women's roles more prominence than usual, giving this Ephesus a satisfactory modern balance. Partly that's due to the increased stage time given Mankin, Ross and Thompson. Chiefly, though, it's a result of the superb work of Julie Eccles as Adriana, the angry, bright, seductive, bewildered wife who woos the wrong Antipholus. And that of Jessa Brie Berkner as her bookish sister, struggling with her attraction to the man she thinks is her brother-in-law.

It doesn't all work. Powell has paced Egeon's long opening speech — the explanation for the whole long-lost twin setup — so slowly that you find yourself focusing on the form rather than the content. Anyone unfamiliar with the play is likely to have trouble understanding the mistaken identities at first.

Nor do all of Powell's alterations make sense. We're not likely to believe that a mayor can order the summary execution of anyone from another town, even in Maine. And there's little reason for Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse to search for an escape boat when the one they arrived in is still sitting at the dock in front of us.

But Powell doesn't leave you much time to contemplate such inconsistencies. Her "Errors" rolls brightly on with sharp comic timing, concise line readings and deftly executed slapstick to its resoundingly upbeat conclusion.

THEATER REVIEW
**'The Comedy of Errors'**

- **PLAYWRIGHT** William Shakespeare
- **DIRECTOR** Jan Powell
- **CAST** Chad Fisk, Robert Weinapple, Greg Bryan, Don Speziale, Julie Eccles, Jessa Brie Berkner
- **THEATER** Free Shakespeare in the Park, various Bay Area parks through Oct. 3 (415-422-2221)

# Beats still don't fit in

## Kerouac and cohorts remain both lionized and unread

By Roger Anderson
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

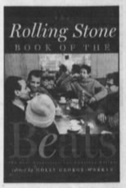
FOR A GOOD 40 years, Beat literature — the works of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure and others — has sat, a big indigestible lump, in the belly of American high culture.

From the first appearance of Ginsberg's "Howl and Other Poems" in 1956 and of Kerouac's novel "On the Road" in '57, with Burroughs' "Naked Lunch" following in 1960, serious literary critics fastidiously have declined to take the Beats' rough writing edges and sopping wet passions seriously.

Popular culture is a different story. The Beatles put Burroughs on the cover of "Sgt. Pepper." Ginsberg made a cameo appearance in the Bob Dylan documentary "Don't Look Back." A generation later, 10,000 Maniacs recorded a song titled "Jack Kerouac." Keith Richards once tried to kick heroin using Burroughs' "apomorphine cure." And Rolling Stone magazine, almost from its earliest issue in 1969, always treated the Beats as the "elder statesmen" of hippiedom they claimed to be.

So the appearance of a big anthology titled "The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture," edited by Holly-George Warren (Hyperion, $27.50), is pretty much a matter of the choir preaching to the choir.

The book dauntingly contains more than 60 entries, ranging from a new essay by Michael McClure to a lengthy critical assessment of the whole Beat book bag by Richard Meltzer. Also included is some interesting perspective from Carolyn Cassady (wife of Neal Cassady, model for Kerouac's "On the Road" hero), analyses by various writers and artists, an absorbing cartoon history of the Beats in New York by Rick Bleier, irrelevant jottings by such celebrities as Johnny Depp, old Rolling Stone reviews of Beat books and records and far too many pictures of an aged Burroughs in the company of such acolytes as Michael Stipe, Patti Smith and David Bowie. Perhaps most welcome and significant is the late Lester Bangs' eloquent obituary for Kerouac, published in Rolling Stone.




Yet the book pretty much leaves the Beat conundrum where it was to begin with: We're still left with the task of understanding how the Beats can be fitted into the world of American letters and thought occupied by Melville, Whitman, Emerson, Faulkner and Eliot.

The inclusion of Meltzer's long critique raises some hopes. Meltzer, like Bangs (who died in 1982), is a true inheritor of the Beat spirit. Freewheeling, drunk with words, perverse and of crazy insight, he's like a nihilistic Kerouac eking out a living writing for RS, Creem, Crawdaddy, the Village Voice and other alternative publications.

One of the very few things Meltzer has ever taken seriously is Beat writing. He truly loves the stuff. "Reading Beat literature," he writes here, "calms (soothes) me the way Buddhism — or let's say Buddhist literature — or even Walt Whitman — can't (or doesn't). Or maybe I don't let it, but I let Beat. Soothes me the way watching the rain can. Or a cat washing himself."

Believe it or not, this is one of the most cogent critical remarks anyone has ever made about Beat writing — and because it's cogent only to a very limited degree, the problem is obvious.

But Meltzer's assessment is a letdown because he can't stay serious long enough to dig into all of the books and poems he knows so

[ See BEAT WRITERS, D-4 ]

## Howard Stern takes Kathie Lee to task

TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES

Howard Stern is clucking at Kathie Lee Gifford.

The talk-show queen announced last week that her son, 9-year-old Cody, will star in a Disney movie. Although Gifford said Cody would like to give his salary to a needy child, she alarmed some when she quipped, "I hope it's a huge hit and I can retire and live off my son."

That prompted Stern to rant that she was pushing Cody into the spotlight. "She's the barker and he's the monkey," Stern said.

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